Laurence, Ruth

2022 Art History Thesis

Dead Portrait's Society

Examining Early Modern Wedding Portraits as Memorial Objects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advisor</th>
<th>Peter Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Additional Advisor</td>
<td>Stefanie Solum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>None of the above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contains Copyrighted Material?</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Release Restrictions</td>
<td>release now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticated Access</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DEAD PORTRAITS SOCIETY: EXAMINING EARLY MODERN WEDDING PORTRAITS AS MEMORIAL OBJECTS

by

Ruth Eloise Roberta Laurence

Professor Stefanie Solum, advisor
Professor Peter Low, advisor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Art History

WILLIAMS COLLEGE
Williamstown, Massachusetts

May 02, 2022
Acknowledgements
Brain children can’t grow up unless they can venture outside. This one never would have seen the light of day if not for these amazing people.

Thank you, Professor Peter Low, who was able to see the jumble of my thoughts and help make them make sense. Since 101 you have been a supportive presence for me, offering feedback and seeing the kernels of possibility buried underneath a lot of verbiage. I am appreciative of all the time you have dedicated to me this year, often offering a fresh and needed perspective when I was lost.

To Professor Solum, who has always encouraged my desire to experience and approached all my ideas with enthusiasm. You have made learning personal and personable, even when we were abruptly scattered to the winds two years ago. Thank you for always finding the most interesting and beautiful ways to frame my ideas—you have always made me sound way smarter than I am.

Thank you to the Williams Art department, and to those who I took classes with—it was a pleasure to be your student. Murad Mumtaz, Catherine Howe, Michael Lewis, Guy Hedreen, Elizabeth McGowan and Michelle Apotsos, you made me a better writer and changed how I look at the world. Learning about art with you was an incredible opportunity. I have all my notebooks, so I won’t forget. And to Mariel Capanna, who was a kind, welcoming presence when I was terrified to work with my hands. The art and craft of fresco is gorgeous, inspiring me to try and make something beautiful with 26 computer keys (27 if you count the delete button).

Ben Ward, Kailyn Gibson and the 2022 thesis cohort: I appreciate the care you took with my work especially when it could not match your lovely prose, Kailyn, or your trailblazing ideas, Ben. Your meticulous comments were integral to the shape of this piece, and also to the minimization of my comma misuse. Charlotte, I don’t want to say I couldn’t have done this without you, because (thank goodness) I didn’t have to. The relief I felt when I learned we would be in 103 together cannot remotely compare to the joy of completing this major with you.

To my friends, I’m sorry I talked your ears off about this, I promise you can stop hearing about it now. I adore you.

Mom, Dad, Liz: I love you dearly. Thank you for making me laugh, for encouraging me, for giving me everything I have. Dad, when you took me to the museum and showed me that Degas, something amazing happened. Art and love have been intertwined ever since.
Francesco Petrarch, a prolific writer of sonnets in the 14th century, was in love with a woman named Laura. He wrote about her over and over, first proclaiming his love for her when she lived, and again when she died. His sonnets, ‘Per mirar Policleto a prova fiso’ (Polyclitus gazing fixedly a thousand years), and ‘Quando giunse a Simone l’alto concetto’ (When Simone had matched the high concept) detail his reaction to a portrait of Laura, painted after her death. While the portrait is now lost to us, Petrarch’s description of the portrait remains, as well as his experience of looking at the work. This experience might be in some ways similar to the way Domenico Ghirlandaio’s *Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni* was viewed (Fig. 1). Ghirlandaio’s posthumous portrait of Giovanna allowed her presence to be felt perhaps even in her absence, just as Laura’s portrait did for Petrarch. In the first sonnet about Laura’s portrait, Petrarch says that Laura’s beauty “vanquished his heart” and that the painter must have been in Paradise with Laura to give us proof of her loveliness. The portrait, the likeness of Laura, holds power over the organ that keeps humans alive, the portrait connects Petrarch to her death by causing a death-like reaction in him, figuratively stopping his heart. Additionally, the proof of her loveliness comes from an abstract place. Her likeness may not be *like* at all, since the painter had to go to paradise or heaven, or wherever Petrarch imagined Laura to be existing after death. We know she is lost to him, but somehow the painter has found her, has made her flesh real from an imaginary place. In the next sonnet, Petrarch continues to emphasize her beauty and his sadness: “since she’s revealed to the sight, so humble,/promising peace to me in her aspect./But when I come to speak with her,/benignly though she seems to listen,/her response to me is still lacking.” Petrarch’s description of Laura’s beauty was tied to his longing for her, his grief over her death and his wish for her to return to him. He feels conflicted about Laura’s beauty in this portrait.
because it exemplifies the feelings of both absence and presence. The portrait makes Laura present, but it also reminds Petrarch of her death.

These sonnets became an inspiration for portraits of women in the early modern period, especially from the 1470s onward, as painters directly appropriated lines from Petrarch’s visual descriptions of Laura. One class of portraits often inspired by Petrarch’s sonnets were those related to weddings and married life. In this thesis, I will demonstrate that these portraits have more in common with Petrarch’s sonnets than just being modeled off the visual descriptions he offers in his poems. These portraits also work on their beholders in an emotional manner that is similar to feelings of grief and sadness that Petrarch describes in his poems.

Portraiture has a special ability to make the absent present. Leon Battista Alberti, a prolific humanist in the 1400s, believed that “painting possesses a truly divine power in that ... it make[s] the absent present (as they say of friendship)”; a portrait was widely understood to be the stand-in of the person whom it represented. Portraits engage viewers at a much deeper level of personal involvement and response than other visual images. They are emotional, psychological images, because they evoke memories, and they are tinged with sadness, preserving a body in painting that has changed or died, but is still communicating from the past. As images often painted during the lifetime of the body, subjects of portraits live through the living and those who look upon the work. In this way, portraits literally counteract death by generating memories both of those who knew the subject, and of those who remember the memory picture of the subject once they have seen it. Portraits merge the past and the present and thereby create an emotional response. The act of looking at these pictures is about recalling something old, but it is also a generative process. Portraits can make new connections for beholders with old memories. Their humanness draws humans to them.
While scholarship on portrait theory focuses on these dynamic qualities of portraiture, discussions of actual portraits in Renaissance scholarship often do not—portraits are interpreted through highly information-oriented eyes. The art historical scholar of the early modern period often attempts to decipher symbolism in portraits, posit the identities of the sitters and break down stylistic conventions within artworks. What is much less often touched on, is how works like these wedding portraits still hold emotion, even for the viewer of today; even if we know no details about these women and their lives; even if we know nothing about the Renaissance, even if we are looking just for the sake of looking. Renaissance scholars also often integrate Petrarch’s influence into their analysis of wedding portraiture. Petrarch is mentioned in anthological undertakings such as the exhibits Art and Love in Renaissance Italy, The Renaissance Portrait: From Donatello to Bellini and books like Italian Paintings of the Fifteenth Century and Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe.  

In each of these works, Petrarch is mentioned in the introduction or the beginning of an article to introduce genre conventions of wedding portraits. According to all these authors, knowing his poetry influenced early modern wedding portraiture is essential to understanding the genre itself. The sonnets that affected visual culture of the early modern the most were two pieces that discuss Laura’s death and Petrarch’s grief. But rarely is the connection emphasized between Petrarch’s influence on the depiction of the iconic Renaissance woman, and the fact that Laura’s portrait was painted to remind Petrarch of his dead lover. In fact, in all the works I mentioned earlier, the fact that Lara was dead is mentioned but not synthesized or expanded upon. Painters and their patrons were influenced by a work that depicts a dead woman. Perhaps it is not just coincidental that one of the models for speaking and painting beauty in the Renaissance is grief, because the idea of what it means to be feminine in the Renaissance age is so concretely different
before and after marriage—ideas of youth and beauty were intertwined with the idea of the virginal, unmarried woman. Women in wedding portraits who are meant to emulate Laura are not just emulating her beauty, which is described through loss and longing. They are also provoking grief akin to that felt by Petrarch.

Simply by seeing the image of a person, a viewer can bestow immortality upon that person, and that experience is a personal, productive one. Remembering, from the Latin rememorari, is to “call to mind,” and that is exactly how an image can be generative—when someone sees a portrait it can create as well as recreate. My aim is to investigate how the wedding portrait specifically can function in this way, that is, as a memorial object and why it is compelling to consider wedding portraits from such a perspective. Further, I would like to focus on how the wedding portrait functions as a memorial object for the modern as well as the fifteenth century viewer. These portraits had a more specific and personal memory function when viewed by close family and friends, I will argue, which is relevant to their contemporary purpose. Historical context should not be completely eschewed, in other words, as it can explain compositional decisions on the part of the painter and distinguish the portraits from each other. But, as the modern viewer knows, time dilutes our ability to distinguish differences in the lives of these women. The functions of these portraits have amalgamated for the modern viewer—they were more specific, tailored and personal in the past. Keeping in mind the different experiences of viewership (those of the original intended audience and the present-day viewer), may bring us, the present-day viewer, paradoxically closer to these women.

Marriage was a watershed moment in the life of a Renaissance woman, one that those involved felt was important to mark through art. The course of a woman’s life in early modern Italy was well defined: childhood, marriage, widowhood or death. Life was structured and
ordered–made of discrete moments and discrete modes of being. The elite Renaissance woman was known by either the name of her father or the name of her husband, and this system of identification, based on male lineage, was considered necessary. How else would people know her? Her wedding was a highly ritualized and visual occasion that marked the transition from her role as father’s daughter to husband’s wife. A series of courtship steps, usually involving the parents of the future husband and wife, ended with a parade around the city, the girl dressed in the finest clothes and jewels, her virtue on display. The highly ceremonial nature of the wedding exemplified the early modern mindset that a girl’s wedding made her a woman. It was a discrete transition, reinforced in aristocratic society by ritual and the sumptuous visual culture of early modern Italy. Rules concerning outward apparel as well as societal views about how being married changed a woman made clear that a girl’s progression to womanhood was not gradual, but rather, immediate—as soon as she was married, childhood was over. This societal transition from girl to woman was also visualized in portraiture.

Many portraits of women from the early modern period have to do with marriage: likenesses of potential brides for parents and other interested parties to inspect, portraits celebrating betrothals, paintings commemorating a marital union, and even posthumous records of deceased spouses. These portraits are windows, through which the modern viewer can glimpse chronicles of significant events. It is important to note, though, that these portraits were not originally made to be snapshots of marriage culture in the fifteenth century, even if they act in this way to the viewer now. Scholarship on these portraits has focused on their reception by those who knew the subjects depicted. Patricia Rubins argues in her article, “Art and the Imagery of Memory,” that our perception of wedding portraits as objects that tell us about weddings, brides, grooms and customs is misleading, because it overshadows their original purpose.
These portraits were mostly painted for wedding purposes: courting spouses, commemorating a young woman in her natal garb or reminding her family of her youth and beauty. They were not meant to explain wedding events, ceremonies, contemporary values, clothes, hairstyles, portrait conventions, familial ties, courtship practices or mourning practices. In other words, their purpose was not to be a visual, historical capsule of what a woman about to get married looked like. In the fifteenth century, wedding portraits were not objects of weddings, but objects “to” or “for” weddings, painted for a match or dedicated to a union. They could also serve as a record of a deceased spouse, painted posthumously. All these portraits were painted to serve a specific purpose that did not have to do with the present-day viewer. By virtue of their existence in the present day, however, they do now serve to explain all these events. That is, they are now objects of weddings.

While it is important to consider a portrait’s original painted purpose, we cannot overlook how the present-day viewer accesses a painting. It has been largely overlooked until now– our unique, personal perspective informs our understanding of these portraits. By considering both the past and the present as temporal priorities, and by considering the original intended reception of these images as well as how the modern viewer today can connect with these works and their subjects, I hope to reveal new levels of meaning in these images.

Since there are many examples of wedding portraits from the early modern period, I will narrow my inquiry by focusing on a number of wedding portraits from the Quattrocento that contain text. Some early modern wedding portraits feature inscriptions, mottos, poetic quotes, and words, either written as separate phrases in the portrait itself, or featured on clothing and jewelry that the subject wears. These are seen in Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni by Domenico Ghirlandaio, Portrait of Ginevra de Benci by Leonardo DaVinci, Portrait of a Man and Woman
at a Casement by Fra Fillipo Lippi and Portrait of Bianca Maria Sforza by Ambrogio de Predis. When inscriptions are part of the composition of the portrait, they become clues to the identity of the sitter. Who she was becomes not just about reading her face, but also about reading text, clothing, and other objects. These elements function as if they are giving the sitter a voice—they are intimately connected with the sitter and so they are a way for the sitter to have agency from within the portrait. By examining text within these portraits, it becomes even more clear that these portraits function through a memorial framework—images and text are often found on memorials themselves after all, because they are visual strategies for connecting. Portraits are objects that look to connect, just as humans do.

Scholarship has not discussed the emotional potential of this kind of portraiture, or even the memorial aspect of these works. The identification of the sitters in these portraits is instead the focus of much existing scholarship. In the exhibition catalogues of Art and Love in Renaissance Italy, Virtue and Beauty, and The Renaissance Portrait: From Donatello to Bellini, descriptions and analyses of wedding portraits, such as Fra Filippo Lippi’s Portrait of a Man and a Woman at a Casement and Domenico Ghirlandaio’s Portrait of a Young Woman summarize theories and arguments about the concrete identities of the sitters. In these two cases there is little conclusive evidence as to the names of the women and the families they came from, but many authors have posited theories. Going all the way back to the 1930’s, scholarship on early modern wedding portraiture often attempts to solve the mystery of which family a woman belonged to and what her name was, sifting through Florentine records, and tracking jewelry and other objects depicted in the paintings. The less conclusive the evidence contained in a painting, the more the painting is a mystery for scholars to piece together.
But these types of arguments neglect the power and complexity of what sits right in front of the viewer. There is so much we can gain by just assessing paintings themselves, examining the objects, text and the women that are laid out in tempera and oil on panels. By examining these works also with deliberate consideration of how we, in the twenty-first century, experience them, we can better understand the emotions these portraits still evoke. These women are long dead, their lives history. But we can still connect with them through these paintings, and through an analysis of the texts they feature. While biographical details, like names of these women and their family histories, still function in important ways in these wedding portraits, text and imagery together ultimately intensify effects of loss and sadness, as do memorial objects. The viewer of today does not read these portraits with only their original, intended purpose in mind: “to” or “for” a wedding. They are now what they were not then: “of” a wedding and what is left “of” the subject.

In the Room the Women Come and Go

Domenico Ghirlandaio’s portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni is both a wedding and memorial portrait, falling into the category of a portrait done to celebrate a marriage after the wife’s death (Fig. 1). This portrait, in other words, has an explicit memorial function, in that Giovanna was deceased when it was painted. Lorenzo Tornabuoni, her widower, commissioned the portrait to commemorate her after she died in childbirth, fulfilling her duty to produce a male heir. It honors her memory and her contribution to the Tornabuoni family: the furthering of a line. It preserves her in her beautiful, glowing youth, and as a member of her husband’s and father’s family. Her lavishly decorated clothing was embellished with the armorial bearings of her own family and her husband’s family, the Tornabuoni: she wears a giornea, or overdress, with the letter L, for Lorenzo, as well as the Tornabuoni diamond
adorning her shoulder (Figs. 2-3). The triangular diamond with flames was like a family crest for the Tornabuoni, while the L specifically marked her as Lorenzo’s beloved. The rich color and texture of her dress indicate the wealth of the Tornabuoni and forever inter her in that wealth; rich in life, rich in death. She also wears a necklace that belonged to the Tornabuoni family. The pendant, resting against her breast, was another kind of signature for the Tornabuoni. Depicted many times in various portraits of Tornabuoni women, its usage is a visual cue. The sight of the pendant immediately tells the viewer that the person wearing the necklace is a Tornabuoni. When considered in relation to her death, the pendant becomes a metonymic vehicle for grief and sadness. Here lineage and wealth, things that have deep roots, are intertwined with the bodily presence and a sense of absence. The necklace, literally resting on her collar, gets to touch Giovanna in a way that her family cannot—it is both a reminder of them and their inability to be with her.

Like many women at the time, Giovanna died in childbirth. Becoming a mother was a much more dangerous experience at the time than in the present day. Children had high mortality rates and so did the people who birthed them. Twenty percent of female deaths in the Quattrocento were pregnancy related. Coral beads in the upper right-hand corner remind the viewer of these circumstances. Coral had many uses: “Besides healing bladder ailments, soothing eyes, and smoothing scars, coral protected infants from harm, according to Pliny the Elder. It aided against the evil eye, epilepsy, hemorrhage, irregular menstrual flow, and difficult labor.” In this case, the coral is a melancholy feature of the portrait. It failed to protect against difficult labor. Giovanna died. But it is also bittersweet: it will perhaps protect her in death and reminds the viewer of the infant she left behind, with a wish that the boy will be protected.
Marriage was not just a death sentence for some (as it was for Giovanna), but also in a more general sense for all women a kind of death. For a woman, becoming a wife meant becoming an entirely new person by leaving girlhood behind. From girl to woman, virgin to mother. Portraits that depict this transition memorialize the before. The idea of the “before” was enforced by lavish wedding ceremonies and strict sumptuary laws; first the couple’s families would undertake a large, public and costly wedding. Immediately following these rituals, brides were required to make their wardrobe more modest, paring down articles of clothing and greatly reducing the number of jewels they could wear on a given day. Elaine Hoystead details sumptuary laws in her article “The Art of Death and Childbirth in Renaissance Italy,” explaining the new wife could wear “only a single brooch and three rings and was forbidden to wear gold or silver jewelry, pearls, crimson cloth, or furs. After three years of marriage had passed, she was forbidden to wear any jewelry.” While this kind of scholarship, which examines the sociocultural histories of the Renaissance, does important background work on visual culture, it neglects the emotional impact of these rules. These laws indicate the end of the celebration and the beginning of a new life, marking a transition with visual cues. But as we see in the portrait of Giovanna as well as other wedding pieces, a desire to be adorned (or a husband’s desire to see his wife adorned) remained. Giovanna, already married, is still showing off the riches of both her new and old families, begging to be noticed and remembered in a lavish and grand manner. The Tornabuoni enacted that desire in this case, since they commissioned the portrait. But we the viewer now see Giovanna herself as the actor for that desire. There is no middleman between us and the portrait. Here, the Tornabuoni have decided to emphasize the pure, virginal bride-to-be, even though Giovanna was already married to Lorenzo for two years. But we cannot make the same human connection with commissioners of the portrait in the work, even though they made
the decision to adorn her in this way. Our visual experience of the portrait and the details in the
work comes between us and the person that commissioned it.

In the nook behind Giovanna is a depiction of a Martial epigram that reads “O art, if you
could depict character and soul, no painting on earth would be more beautiful.” As Stefan
Weppelmann, a scholar of Renaissance portraiture, says in his analysis of the painting,
“especially with regard to the tragic death of the young wife, the couplet in effect urges the
viewer to regard the portrait as a commemoration of Giovanna; as essential nature and virtue
and, by extension, praises the achievement of the artist.” Here Weppelman is not just
proclaiming this piece as a memorial object but noting that we can interpret this painting as
highly concentrated in its affective charge, encouraging an emotional response because of the
intensity of the work. It is Giovanna displayed in her most potent form. Ideas of essential nature
are prevalent in many kinds of funerary art. Specific memories of loved ones fade over time— the
bereaved can easily forget details about the deceased’s face, the sound of their voice, their third
favorite food. Essential nature preserves the essence of a person, the things that their loved ones
want their legacy to become, the character traits and visual qualities that matter most, and these
ideas are often conveyed through epitaphs, which are pieces written to memorialize people, often
inscribed on tombstones; in this case, painted on paper. Epitaphs are more effective when they
are short and sweet; one does not inscribe the contents of a book on a tombstone. So, the viewer
is left with one sentence to remember Giovanna by, making the inscription more impactful than a
hefty tome of words. Pictures are often easier to remember than words and short, repeatable,
punchy phrases can more easily echo in the mind than lengthy writings. The combination of the
picture and the epigram goes together in the brain. After the viewer leaves the work, they can
imagine the portrait and think of the epigram or repeat the epigram and think of the portrait. Giovanna and the words she touches go so easily together.

The inclusion of the inscription in the painting also means that Giovanna can talk to the viewer from the grave. Including text lends concrete language to a hidden inner voice inside the head of every portrait subject. While it is true that Lorenzo Tornabuoni most likely devised the epigram, deciding to use Martial’s words in a specific manner, Giovanna is the one intimately connected with the inscription. Even though she did not choose this text, the present-day viewer can associate it with her as if she speaks it, because that input, of text and figure together, is what we receive when we view the work. Her slender, ramrod-straight neck overlaps with the bottom right corner of the paper, casting a shadow on the words, transforming them “from a motto to a lament,” which, for her present family, made this portrait not dissimilar to visiting a grave. For the modern viewer, the contact between her neck and the paper creates a more visceral experience. Even if we cannot understand what the writing says, it being in Latin after all, it still evokes a funerary association. Not only are epitaphs still a common feature of funerary monuments today, but the writing’s proximity to her neck makes beholding the work a more tactile experience, helping us connect to the real person who was once breathing.

During the Quattrocento, it was believed that poetry was a way to confer immortality; Martial was a well-known literary figure, and through association, Giovanna would survive just as his poetry had. This immortality is sad in its contradictions. The epigram suggests art cannot depict soul, reminding us of the unreachable absence in Giovanna’s presence. The portrait is beautiful, like she was, but it can never be her, it can only remind us of her. We see this unreachable quality through other visual cues. There is a duality of dynamism and stillness in the portrait, like the scene was once full of people getting Giovanna ready for her portrait session,
the ghost of movement remains. The paper epigram has been rendered to look like it was folded, and someone just smoothed it out. Her curls are perfectly coiffed, like someone just adjusted them and they were quickly painted before strands fell out of place. For the original audience, it would be easy to place oneself in the scene as a person who was just there with Giovanna (the real woman, not the portrait). But now it is us, the viewer, who sees what is left of her. We too could place ourselves in the room and hypothesize a situation to connect with Giovanna. Without intimate details of the setting in the portrait we cannot empathize with Giovanna’s friends and family. But the viewer’s imagination can run wild.

Even now, so far removed from her time, we can still access the sadness in this portrait. We can see that she was once beautiful, once loved, once surrounded by objects meant to comfort and protect her. We understand that this, what is left of her, is not actually and can never be her. So perhaps there is sadness in that. Our inability to access memories of the real her is also sad; biographical details and inside jokes are lost over time, and yet she remains. So, in some way, the inscription did what it was always meant to: confer immortality. Inscriptions can function in similar ways in other 15th-century wedding portraits, even those in which the subject is not deceased.

On the reverse of Leonardo da Vinci’s portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci is written “VIRTUTEM FORMA DECORAT,” or “Beauty Adorns Virtue” (Figs. 4-5).\[^{36}\] This painting records the betrothal between Ginevra and Luigi di Bernardo Niccolini, as well as Ginevra’s status as the paramount Florentine bride, being both beautiful and chaste.\[^{37}\] The content of this painted message is meant to convey that Ginevra is societally virtuous, but it is operating similarly to the inscription in Giovanna’s portrait. Beauty adorns virtue in this painting, but the viewer knows that the passage of time is forward-moving. As a married woman, Ginevra will no
longer be chaste, and, as an older woman, she will not always be beautiful, in the sense that youth and beauty were considered highly intertwined in the early modern period. The inscription makes clear that the portrait is doing the act of preserving, just as in the Ghirlandaio. Leonardo even appropriates motifs from funerary art in his rendering of the banderole. David Alan Brown’s scholarship on this painting has shown that Leonardo was inspired by Verrochio’s tomb of Piero and Giovanni de’ Medici in the old sacristy of San Lorenzo of 1472 (Figs. 5–7). The tomb is a red porphyry sarcophagus with “banderoles running around the foliate wreaths.” Leonardo’s rendering of the phrase is depicted in a similar font, with similar letter spacing to the inscribed letters on Verrochio’s tomb. Stone is often used in funerary art to signal a strong, enduring presence: the dead will live on with hardy material. Leonardo’s stylistic decision to make the inscription like an epitaph on a tomb brings a mournful quality to the work; he simulates marble to say that the nature of the sitter, her essential being, will endure. He also equates the portrait of Ginevra with the gravity and eternal nature of stone funerary art. Stone conveys a heaviness that painting cannot—nevertheless Leonardo depicts a font that was originally etched in stone against a background that is meant to look like stone. However, the banderole is less sedentary, more active and alive than the tomb, since it is rendered with ribbon-like curvature. Leonardo suggests that virtue and beauty—not to mention painting itself—may be both eternal and lively.

With the inscription Leonardo also acknowledges the sorrow of portraiture in its ability to portray one’s beloved by making sure to associate Ginevra with Laura and Petrarchan ideas of beauty. Just like the dead Giovanna, Ginevra’s image and the inscription on the reverse work together to create a memoryscape that attempts to fill the void of her absence. But it also touches
back to the idea in Martial’s epigram. Perhaps portraits will always be filled with a sense that something is missing.

The feeling of absence permeates Fra Filippo Lippi’s Portrait of a Man and Woman at a Casement, and something else is missing (Fig. 8). The woman and man in the portrait have yet to be conclusively identified. This portrait contains an inscription that was not written out on illusionistic paper, but rather placed directly on the body of the female subject. So, while we do not know the woman’s identity, we can instead focus on the inscription, which involves a fully bodily encounter. This woman sits in an enclosed space, facing a man who is probably her beloved. The portrait has been interpreted in many ways: as a celebration of a wedding between the two figures, as a commemoration of the birth of the couple’s son, and as a posthumous memorial image similar to the portrait of Giovanna, although it is most widely considered with the first interpretation in mind. The woman looks at the man with a measured gaze but softly smiles, the slight upturn of her lips giving the viewer a small clue of what is going on inside her head. Her hands are artfully placed one on top of the other displaying rings that were customarily gifted during wedding proceedings. Looking at her hands can help us feel the cloth of her dress bunching in our fingers, as it does in hers, our mirror neurons activated by the sight of skin against skin and cloth. Jewels are everywhere in this painting, lining and adorning the young woman’s hat, pinned to her shoulder, resting upon her neck, and even embroidered on her sleeve. Spelled out there, on the part of her sleeve that rests on her left wrist, in big capital letters, is the word “LEALTA,” or loyalty (Fig. 9). The depiction of this inscription in the painting is the reason why most scholars interpret the painting as a wedding portrait. The concise statement “LEALTA” evokes values of marriage, of what a husband and wife owe to each other. The word, written on her body, is devotional. Since we are not her betrothed, we will never be allowed to
see the skin of her wrist, upon which the fabric of her overdress lies. But it is easy to imagine this word functioning as an oath, a promise, like the promises husbands and wives make to each other at the altar. The wrist is an intimate, sensual area of the human body. It is physically quite delicate—visible veins and bones make it vulnerable. Perfume goes on wrists because the skin is thinner there and emits more heat. A wrist smells like the essence of you and is a highly sensitive pressure point on the body. And on her wrist, a distilling place on the body, loyalty, a distilling word, is written. Further, this word is spelled out in gold and pearls—precious and beautiful materials—not just embroidered in thread.

Pearls often adorned women in wedding portraits because they were considered symbolic of purity and evoked the Virgin Mary. Therefore, they emphasized the purity of their subject. There is something uncanny about the value placed on pearls, both now and in the early modern period. As Karen Raber details, “unlike other gems, the Pearl is notoriously ephemeral, fragile, and prone to degradation when exposed to any kind of rough treatment, making them surprisingly insecure sources of wealth.” It is as if we have a morbid fascination with these jewels. Part of their beauty is knowing that they are ephemeral, just like the beauty and chastity of the woman in this portrait. This ephemerality is magnified in the present-day, because death (for this woman) has transitioned from idea to reality: she is long gone. But still, ideas of the fleeting nature of beauty and life may have been more impactful for the intended audience. A parent viewing this work would know their child is leaving them for good. Gold, in contrast, was a more constant, solid, material, and these two precious substances work together to flesh out all the work the word loyalty can do. The gold aligns with the content and implications of loyalty, because it lasts longer and is a more hardy, inorganic material. The pearls are a memento mori of
sorts, not just reminding the viewer that the woman will no longer be virginal but also that her beauty will fade and eventually, her body as well.

In this work, it is also important to consider the surroundings in which Lippi has depicted the female subject’s body. A common convention of early modern female portraiture was the placement of the woman in interior, domestic spaces. Giovanna was one of these women, boxed in by the walls of a room. Other portraits of women are disconnected from space entirely, set adrift in swashes of color, voids with no sense of orientation for the viewer. Lippi’s portrait falls outside these conventions–through the window we can see the world outside of the room. And the man peers in from the world outside. The window in the portrait reminds us that there is a world out there, beyond this woman. The man comes from that world, but we the viewer are in the room with the woman. The whole interior space is laid out for us. Perhaps we could see ourselves in the man, intruding into her world, but more probably we are already on the inside with her, just because of our gaze. Although I mentioned earlier that the word “LEALTA” has informed the most common assumption of this painting being a wedding portrait, sometimes the woman is interpreted as being dead. As Jeffrey Ruda explains in his extensive catalog on Fra Filippo Lippi, “the [man and the woman] are both spatially and psychologically independent of each other. This separation seems unlikely for an ordinary married or betrothed couple, but the woman’s death might explain it.” Just like it may never be truly possible to identify the figures in the portrait with complete certainty, it may never be possible to determine whether this portrait was indeed commissioned to mark a betrothal, wedding, birth or death. The themes of distance and intimacy here, coupled with the epitaph-like phrase on the women’s sleeve can easily represent either a marriage or death, which are both important and transitional life events. Perhaps that may clue us into the sadness present in these kinds of celebratory portraits, works
meant to commemorate events. Any viewer looking at the work now does not have to know whether or not this woman had recently died or was getting married. Instead, we can have an intimate, sensory experience with the subject. And perhaps we can identify with the ambiguity in the portrait. The woman is unreachable to us, just as she is unreachable to the man in the portrait, who is presumably her husband.

It is interesting to consider to whom the idea of loyalty is directed, because it supports the idea that the portrait is meant to be directly connecting with the viewer. Since the male figure in the portrait is probably her husband, the obvious answer is her new home. But often portraits celebrating a marriage stayed with the women’s natal family as a reminder of who they used to be, claiming them even after they belonged to someone else.\textsuperscript{49} “LEALTA,” in this context, may bridge the divide between who this woman used to be and who she will become. Additionally, “LEALTA” is written so that it is legible to the woman in the portrait. It would be upside down for the man should he look down at her wrist. It is also legible to the viewer, but not directly oriented towards them, as it is for the woman. It makes that message, \textit{loyalty}, something between her and the viewer, and less about her alleged husband. When considering the original context, the orientation of the word might give us some supporting clues as to who had a stake in commissioning the portrait and why it was painted. In fact, it is important to acknowledge that urge.

Many historians before me have acted on this urge. It feels natural for every detail in the portrait to require an explanation. It feels natural to use details to insist and to prove, to exhibit the solving of a mystery. The urge to discover and claim and achieve is inherent to this type of examination.\textsuperscript{50} But in that process, maybe the meaning is missed. LEALTA is something intimately associated with that woman, a word that is between her and the person who gazes
upon her. It is inviting the viewer, drawing them to her, making a connection. It works like the epitaph on a gravestone, and perhaps not just a definitional word, but a way to understand the woman’s experience. The word itself, being short and descriptive, can be viewed with an epitaph-like function, but in this portrait, we can also understand it as something the woman needs to accept. Like she is being told by someone else who to be, or she is being reminded of how she must be. And the viewer, reading that word, is being told as well. Through this word we see a way of being, of being in the now, not just in the past, like the information an epitaph tells us.

For the present-day viewer, “LEALTA” also gives us insight into the values of Florentine society. With one word she embodies every virginal woman who is meant to be a loyal daughter and subsequently a loyal wife. This is a different kind of art history than the one to which a learner is usually exposed, if we allow ourselves to focus on the effect the portrait can have on the viewer today and not on the unknown biographical details of the work. The viewer’s historical mindset, when looking at these kinds of portraits, is not just about facts, especially in regard to this work, where the sitter’s identity and the purpose of the work is unknown. Their mindset is instead focused on connection. We look upon the image and experience the literal feeling of being so close and yet so far, and we see her as a loyal woman, with some ambiguity, only going off of what is rendered in paint right in front of us. The placement of the word helps the viewer feel the intimacy expressed in this work, whether the viewer is a family member of the woman or me, looking at this painting now, imagining my fingers on her wrist, wishing I could know who she felt loyal to, and what the weight of the word on her sleeve meant. The sheen and luminosity of the pearls evokes the smoothness of skin lying underneath her sleeve, which is why pearls were associated with Renaissance femininity. She was once warm, blood
running through the veins on her wrist, animating her fingers adorned with rings, and this word, “LEALTA,” reminds us of her corporeal nature, now inaccessible to us.

While the woman in the room in Lippi’s portrait remains a mystery, even portraits wherein the identity of the sitter is known operate in a similar way. Bianca Maria Sforza was painted by Ambrogio de Predis so that her likeness could be sent to Emperor Maximilian I for his approval (Fig. 10). She eventually became his wife, a huge success for Ludovico il Moro, Duke of Milan, who was her uncle and who commissioned the portrait. In the portrait Bianca wears a jeweled headdress in the shape of a brush (the Sforza crest) with the Sforza motto, “MERITO ET TEMPORE,” written on it (Fig. 11). Here, the motto, meaning “With merit and time,” is not inscribed on the more mutable, flexible and impermanent medium of cloth, but around metal, a durable, eye-catching testament to Bianca’s role in not only her successful family, but also her family’s success. Bianca is almost overwhelmed by her finery in this piece and this idea of merit, time and family seems like a daunting statement when applied to the woman who we see before us.

Bianca’s flawless face, her auburn hair, her porcelain skin indicate she is a lady, but nothing about her can compete with her sumptuous jewelry, headpiece, and dress. In addition to a necklace of large white pearls, a strand of white and a strand of black pearls crisscross to zigzag across her ponytail. Pearls punctuate the grid of her headpiece. The pearls are vivacious, much more so than Bianca herself who is shown with an impassive expression. Each individual pearl is highlighted with a bright white brushstroke, nothing else on the canvas catches the light quite like the pearls. The pearls here flood the portrait, especially compared to the pearls Lippi depicts. If we see the woman in Lippi’s portrait speaking with measured tones, Bianca, or rather, the splendor of her outfit, sings. While pearls hold similar meanings in both works, Bianca is
VIRTUOUS rather than virtuous, PURE rather than pure. The messaging almost dwarfs the person in this portrait, which can make it difficult to connect with Bianca. Her hair is monochromatic, and her skin is subtly shaded--there is little detail, highlighting or shading in the brown and beige tones, but each individual jewel is painted so that it shines. This display, coupled with the ideas conveyed by the Sforza motto, make the portrait wrestle between the depicted subject and the man behind the portrait’s commission. The piece is uncomfortable in its original context, a woman directed by her father, changed forever by marriage, laden with the weight of her birth family. Pearls no longer seem ephemeral in this picturescape. They feel weightier and more permanent, especially compared to the woman underneath all the stuff. Even Bianca herself seems weighed down. This is not a cheery image.

Bianca’s portrait would most likely have resided in the camera or anticamera of the husband’s bedroom suite, in the symbolic center of the house.53 For any family or friends of Bianca, as well as the bride herself, this portrait may have been an uncomfortably dissonant item, toggling between Bianca’s status as the Holy Roman Empress and her former life as a member of the ruling family of Milan. The braid down Bianca’s back was a hairstyle that came into fashion by way of her aunt, Beatrice d’Este. The distinctive coiffure became iconically associated with the Sforza family when Beatrice started wearing the hairstyle.54 It is a primal notion to want to leave a mark, a reminder of yourself as well as times past. Perhaps this need stems from a fear of being forgotten. Death is physical, but one can live on in the minds of others. In this case, the death of Lady Bianca Maria Sforza and the birth of Bianca Maria Sforza, Empress of the Holy Roman Empire and Queen of Germany are intertwined and echo throughout the portrait. With merit and time, Bianca was marked as a Sforza forever, but this also echoes almost exactly what she is for us now, in death.
There Will be Time to Prepare a Face to Meet the Faces that you Meet

These portraits now reside in museums, although who knows if the galleries will be their final resting place. They are not alone, often placed next to other portraits of other people, in rooms full of painted likenesses all keeping one another company. We see them framed, and the frame can be a way to keep the portrait separate from us. It keeps these women contained, and it lets us know they are in a little painted world, reminding the viewer of that separation from the subject. It is like the proscenium, separating the stage from the audience. And so we stare deep into the depth of these works, and these women almost break out. They are almost real, and as Roland Barthes has pointed out, that is what hurts the most: “The almost: love’s dreadful regime, but also the dream’s disappointing status—which is why I hate dreams. For I often dream about her (I dream only about her), but it is never quite my mother [....] And confronted with the photograph, as in the dream, it is the same effort, the same Sisyphean labor: to reascend, straining toward the essence, to climb back down without having seen it, and to begin all over again.” Here Barthes is speaking about a photograph of his mother, but I would argue this same kind of lament could be a present anxiety for the present-day viewer and the subject’s family and friends. For the original intended audience, the frame separates the viewer from the reality of someone’s likeness. Even Petrarch observed something similar in one of his sonnets about Laura’s portrait, six hundred years earlier: “Pygmalion, what delight you had/from your creation, since the joy I wish/but once, you possessed a thousand times.” Here he refers to the myth of Pygmalion, where a sculptor falls in love with his creation. Unlike when Petrarch gazes upon the artistic representation of Laura, Pygmalion’s artistic desire comes to life, a joy he can possess over and over again. That is what Petrarch and Barthes want, to gaze at their loved ones and for their loved ones to leap from a world of two-dimensions to one of three. For the modern day
viewer, it reminds us, like the inscriptions do, of the memory of the subject. The inclusion of the inscription in these portraits makes the sitter self-aware in some way, especially as they are intimately involved with the inscription. The epigrams touch Giovanna and rest on the attire of Bianca and the woman in the Lippi portrait. The inscription can help start a conversation between the viewer and the subject. Unlike the museum labels drilled into the walls next to these portraits, the text and image within the picture are highly integrated, but the text adds a different kind of engagement. Stylistically, each inscription is different because obviously they are a part of the portrait. But they make that connection a little easier for the viewer. Words and image work well together in memory.

Perhaps an even more powerful part of the experience is the remarkable naturalism of these bust-length portraits. The combination of the genre of portraiture with the naturalism of oil and tempera painting makes it so easy to be a part of a conversation with these women. When you have a conversation with another person you can composite them visually just like these portraits (as long as both persons are relatively the same height). Waist up or bust-length views are what we experience when we connect with people every day. And since these pieces are rendered so that they could be any real-life person that one could meet one day, we want to feel like we have met them. Like they’re just another friendly face we could pass on the street. Except, when we don’t pass them by, when we stand in front of them, we can then access a sense of loss.

The portrait will never be enough and yet, it has to be—what else can cross the uncrossable divide between the dead and the living except a memory? This form of time travel is exclusively tied to our experience of viewing. The portrait preserves the subject as they were when painted, or even younger, in the case of Giovanna. It also immediately crosses into the
future whenever it is looked at. It is not that we, the viewer, are transported back into the time of Giovanna, or Ginevra, or Woman in a Casement, or Bianca, it is that they are brought to us. They come back to life over and over again—perhaps transcending their frames. It may seem like we, the viewer, are in the obvious position of agency. They are inanimate depictions of women, after all, still figures visible from the shoulders up. But we cannot reach out to these women. Instead, they reach out to us. They are asking us to remember them. The experience of these paintings was originally predicated on an intimacy of the person sitting in front of the artist. Although that knowledge was once relevant, (a past reality where a family member could recall the sound of Giovanna’s voice, or Bianca’s uncle could picture her sitting for de Predis), it no longer can be, and therefore is not. Perhaps our experience with these portraits is ultimately more intimate because they speak for themselves, and we map our own experiences onto them. The layperson, minimally exposed to knowledge about Giovanna’s family history or the early modern period, has little preconceived notion of who she was and what her life was like. The possibilities are endless. Even the art historian, armed with facts and figures, can never know her presence in the way we think about knowing someone and having a relationship with them. And yet, she is present, she sits in front of us. These works inspire an emotionally intense reaction, all we have to do is stand in front of them. The woman in the portrait is dead and alive and what is more bittersweet than that feeling of almost?


8 New Renaissance, or Some Women Named Ginevra.” In Art and Love in Renaissance Italy. edited by Andrea Bayer. 17-27 New York: New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Press, 2008 17


11 This methodology was heavily influenced by Seth Estrin’s article, “Cold Comforts,” which explains how a formulaic, impersonal stele can become an emotional object focused on memory and loss that a viewer in the present can access and connect with on their own terms. Estrin, Seth. “Cold Comfort: Empathy and Memory in an Archaic Funerary Monument from Akraiphia.” Classical Antiquity 35, no. 2 (October 1, 2016): 189–214. https://doi.org/10.1527/ca.2016.35.2.189.


This categorization is from Everett Fahy’s definition of wedding portraits, which he used in an article for the exhibition *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*: Fahy, Everett. “The Marriage Portrait in the Renaissance, or Some Women Named Ginevra.” In *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, edited by Andrea Bayer. 17–27 New York: New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Press, 2008 17.


Joseph Breck was a Renaissance scholar who heavily influenced the way art historians discuss Renaissance and European art. He wrote more than two hundred scholarly works on Renaissance pieces, many of which hypothesized the identities of subjects in portraiture. He was also responsible for hypothesizing attributions of paintings. He was one of the first art historians to posit a theory as to the identity of the sitters in Lippi’s painting. Most scholarly work about Lippi’s painting which succeeded his article referenced his hypothesis, to support, refute, or base new arguments in. This serves as an example of the scholarly labor and focus that these hypotheses occupy. It is possible that more time and energy has been spent attempting to identify the sitters in Lippi’s painting than any other scholarly undertakings in reference to that work: Breck, Joseph. “A Double Portrait by Fra Filippo Lippi.” *Art in America* 2 (1913): 44–55.


The Mer’s catalog of Italian paintings has a section on this work. Not only do they reference the various theories about who the woman and man are, but the entire References section which pertains to this painting is dedicated to a history of theories of attribution. Starting with works from 1883, the reference section (on page 85) lists every single theory about who the man and woman in the portrait are and what prompted the art historian to come to that conclusion. No other types of scholarship are listed.


Illustrations:

Fig. 1. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni*, 1489-1490, Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Inv. no. 158 (1935.6) Photo: https://www.museothyssen.org/en/collection/artists/ghirlandaio-domenico/portrait-giovanna-degli-albizzi-tornabuoni
Fig. 2. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni*, (Fig. 1), detail showing the L for Lorenzo on Giovanna’s shoulder. Photo: https://www.museothyssen.org/en/collection/artists/ghirlandaio-domenico/portrait-giovanna-degli-albizzi-tornabuoni
Fig. 3. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni*, (Fig. 1), detail showing the Tornabuoni diamond emblem. Photo: https://www.museothyssen.org/en/collection/artists/ghirlandaio-domenico/portrait-giovanna-degli-albizzi-tornabuoni
Fig. 4. Leonardo da Vinci, *Ginevra de' Benci [obverse]*, c. 1474/1478, Washington DC, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, Accession No. 1967.6.1.a Photo: https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.50724.html
Fig. 5. Leonardo da Vinci, Wreath of Laurel, Palm, and Juniper with a Scroll inscribed Virtutem Forma Decorat [reverse], c. 1474/1478, Washington DC, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, Accession No. 1967.6.1.a Photo: https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.50725.html
Fig. 6. Andrea del Verrocchio, *Monument to Piero and Giovanni de’ Medici*, 1469-1473, Old Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence, Italy Photo: https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/SCALA_ARCHIVES_10310195721;prevRouteTS=1649801777517
Fig. 7. Andrea del Verrocchio, *Monument to Piero and Giovanni de' Medici, detail of lettering*, 1469-1473, Old Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence, Italy. Photo: https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/AHLIEBERMANIG_10313146195;prevRouteTS=1649801751

207
Fig. 8. Fra Filippo Lippi, *Portrait of a Woman and a Man at a Casement*, ca. 1440, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession Number: 89.15.19, Photo: https://library.artstor.org/asset/MMA_IAP_1039650895.
Fig. 9. Fra Filippo Lippi, *Portrait of a Woman and a Man at a Casement*, (Fig. 7), detail showing the “LEALTA” inscription on the woman’s sleeve Photo: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436896
Fig. 10. Ambrogio de Predis, *Bianca Maria Sforza*, probably 1493, Washington DC, National Gallery of Art, Widener Fund, Accession no.1942.9.53 Photo: https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.1192.html#history
Fig. 11. Ambrogio de Predis, Bianca Maria Sforza, detail showing “MERITO ET TEMPORE” inscription on Bianca’s headdress. Photo: https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/bianca-maria-sforza/aAGrEK10bz8jw?ms=%7B%22x%22%3A0.5167682031737412%2C%22y%22%3A0.16329396527193%2C%22z%22%3A0.12%2C%22size%22%3A%7B%22width%22%3A0.46677471636953%2C%22height%22%3A0.1658585858585887%7D%7D
Works Cited


Weppelmann Stefan. “Some Thoughts on Likeness in Italian Early Renaissance Portraits.” In The Renaissance Portrait: From Donatello to Bellini. Edited by Keith Christiansen, Stefan